

A little collecting, and a little celebrating!

Ballet and traveling clothes, Manhattan and bungalows— All the world's a palimpsest

by Ginalie Swaim

EVERYBODY COLLECTS something, right? My son collects basketball cards. My daughter used to collect water. She had dozens of samples—from Lake Superior, a Florida lake, Norway, the Mississippi, the River Thames. I hope they have not evaporated in the attic, where the little bottles are now stored.

I store my collection in a manila file folder in my office. It's labeled "Use of the word 'palimpsest.'" After I started editing this magazine in 1986, I began collecting examples where the word was used. Occasionally colleagues or readers added to my collection. Last year, my work-study assistant Becky Hawbaker pulled out of a University of Iowa Libraries computer no less than 198 examples of the word "palimpsest" used in newspaper articles in the last seven years. I don't know if computer searches are a fair way to expand one's collections, but those 198 examples have shown me that "palimpsest" isn't quite as an obscure word as I had thought—although it's still hard to pronounce. (Remember: accent on the first syllable.)

To celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of *The Palimpsest*, I'm reprinting some of my favorites here, followed by the writer's name. I begin with an illustrious name in history, Frederick Jackson Turner, who used the "p-word" in his landmark thesis in 1893, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." I end with a blank sentence. This is where you get to be the writer. Have fun coming up with your own sentence or two using the common noun "palimpsest" and send it to

The Palimpsest, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240 (fax 319-335-3924). Include your name, address, and phone. We hope to publish some in future issues.

"Particularly in eastern States this page is a palimpsest. What is now a manufacturing State was in an earlier decade an area of intensive farming. Earlier yet it had been a wheat area, and still earlier the 'range' had attracted the cattle-herder."—*Frederick Jackson Turner*

"A palimpsest is a parchment or tablet that has been recycled—written on more than once, with the previous text imperfectly erased and visible beneath the new."—*David Sterritt*

"Land is also a palimpsest. A succession of human cultures, each with different priorities, has painted its record on the basic environmental canvas. Today's shopping center was yesterday's orchard and before that a frontier farm and an Indian council ring."—*Roderick Nash*

"'Palimpsest' / Scrub this one, cancel that. / All those canvases painted over— / years piled upon years. / ... Words scratched out on the pad / stand tall under the weight of the pencil. / What's left under the erasure?"—*James L. McPherson*

"For her, the map of Manhattan is a palimpsest—scratch the surface of any block, and you'll find the memory of a past love or a

piece of family history.”—*Diana Postlethwaite*

“Helen Keller had a miraculous gift for deciphering the fragrant palimpsest of life, all the ‘layers’ that most of us read as a blur. She recognized ‘an old-fashioned country house because it has several layers of odors, left by a succession of families, of plants, of perfumes and draperies.’”—*Diane Ackerman*

“The walls of New York’s SoHo, the artists’ enclave, are palimpsests of aesthetic and social concern, as the 85 color photographs make clear.”—*Chuck Twardy*

“The land is a palimpsest of marks and tracks left by Cahuilla Indians, colonial Spaniards, American soldiers, gold-seekers and stage-coach drivers.”—*R. V. Deneberg*

“Irish place-names are spots in time as well as space, palimpsests in which a whole disrupted history lies waiting to be deciphered.”—*Terry Eagleton*

“Great comedians cannot help thinking of the world they live in as a palimpsest, a series of submerged texts and acts that must be made intelligible.”—*Gerald Early*

“Sicily, with a landmass of around 10,000 square miles, is the largest island in the Mediterranean and its history is a palimpsest of European culture. One could peel it like an onion, discovering riches at every layer.”—*Michael Mewshaw*

“Closer inspection reveals that it [the house] is a palimpsest: Behind the quirky new skin is an old ordinary bungalow sheathed with pink asbestos shingles.”—*Benjamin Forgey*

“‘The Name of the Rose’ is billed as a ‘palimpsest’ of the Umberto Eco novel. You may or may not know what the heck a palimpsest is, or whether you can order one out of the Sharper Image catalogue, but the point is that Sean Connery could hardly pronounce it.”—*Paul Attanasio*

“In fact, all of Palestrina is a good study of the

kind of palimpsest that Henry James so often praised when speaking of the monuments he had seen in Rome. He called them traces of successive moments.”—*Louis Inturrisi*

“Unlike the layer of deposits typical of a deeply stratified site, what comes into view is a palimpsest of pits, wall trenches, postholes and graves, which frequently overlapped.”—*Peter Bogucki and Ryszard Grygiel*

“The Corcoran [Gallery of Art], to me, is a palace of echoes, a palimpsest of remembered people and events—hilarious, bizarre, edifying, moving.”—*Benjamin Forgey*

“Paintings now look like palimpsests, with every stage of the work showing through the layers of paint, glaze, collage, or whatever else.”—*Mary S. Cowen*

“From experimental work done on the brain, Sagan extrapolates that it is a kind of evolutionary palimpsest, in which ‘the deep and ancient parts are functioning still.’”—*David Gelman, et al.*

“And so, when one wonders what makes the Bolshoi dance the way it does, the answer lies in a historical palimpsest. It is hardly a secret that Italian and French ballet dominated Russian ballet in the 19th century.”—*Anna Kisselgoff*

“Indeed, clothes became palimpsests of the journey’s mishaps and meals: a slippery mussel in Milan sullied my blue and white sundress, while a poorly closed bottle of mouthwash stained my husband’s pajamas.”—*author unknown, The New York Times*

“
_____ palimpsest _____
_____.”—*you’re the author*

Please send us your creations, as part of this seventy-fifth anniversary celebration of Iowa’s only popular history magazine . . . *The Palimpsest*.

Thanks. —*The Editor*